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Jill Littrell
Georgia State University

Elizabeth Beck
Georgia State University

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Perceiving Oppression: Relationships with Resilience, Self-Esteem, Depressive Symptoms, and Reliance on God in African-American Homeless Men

JILL LITTRELL

Georgia State University

ELIZABETH BECK

Georgia State University

Empowerment has been proffered as a desirable goal for many disadvantaged populations. The process of empowerment can include encouraging disadvantaged individuals to recognize the structural factors in society (e.g., discrimination, oppression, injustice) which contribute to disadvantaged status. Two studies sought to determine the impact that recognition of oppression has on a disadvantaged individual's (1) self-esteem; (2) level of depressive symptoms; (3) resilience which includes a sense of mastery and optimism; (4) anger; and (5) reliance on God. These issues were investigated in a sample of African-American men seeking services at a soup-kitchen ministry. Perceptions of racial discrimination were marginally associated with attenuated levels of depressive symptoms. There was no evidence that perception of oppression influenced anger or self-esteem. However, belief in a just world was associated with some aspects of resilience and stronger reliance on God. Attributions to individual causes of homelessness were marginally associated with greater optimism. Those practitioners endeavoring to empower should be cautious about impairing clients' belief in a just world or undermining a sense of personal control over events.

Susser (1992) has advocated for application of the process of empowerment to the homeless. For some advocates of empowerment, the process involves helping disadvantaged persons to recognize the discrimination which operates in the society. For example, according to Gutierrez (1990) the process of empowerment

should involve (1) the development of collective identification with similarly disadvantaged individuals; (2) the recognition that negative group outcomes (such as poverty) are caused by structural factors in the society; (3) a change in the way personal bad outcomes are explained such that structural factors are blamed for negative outcomes rather than personal failings; (4) the collective effort to work toward social change; and (5) an increase in personal self-efficacy.

The focus of the present investigation will be an exploration of the second and third components in Gutierrez's proposed process of empowerment, viz., acknowledging that group negative outcomes are caused by structural factors (e.g., oppression/discrimination) in the society as opposed to individual failings. This investigation will examine the correlates of perceiving oppression/discrimination and/or attributing disadvantaged status to structural factors in society. The question will be explored in a sample of homeless, African-American men. Because African-American men are disproportionately represented among the homeless (Wright, 1989, p. 66), structural attributions for the homelessness of African-American males are highly cognitively available. Discrimination constitutes a plausible explanation for the homelessness of African-American men both for observers and for the men themselves. This investigation will examine the correlates for homeless, or tentatively sheltered, African-American men of acknowledging injustice/discrimination and/or structural factors in the society as contributing factors to disadvantaged status. It should be noted, that while the psychological consequences of perceiving discrimination have been explored in middle class samples (Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991; Ruggiero & Taylor, 1995), little exploration of this issue has been occurred within indigent samples.

Possible Pros and Cons of Recognizing Injustice

Gutierrez (1990) has argued that if disenfranchised individuals view societal factors as the cause of their disadvantage, and concomitantly cease believing that they are to blame for their disadvantage, their level of self-esteem will increase. In line with this thinking, Crocker et al. (1991) found that the impact of negative, evaluative feedback on the self-esteem of African-American

women was diminished when these women could attribute this feedback to racial prejudice of the evaluator. Analogously, we hypothesize that if African-American, homeless men can recognize discrimination in the society and/or attribute homelessness to this oppression, their self-esteem may be protected. Further, they might escape the higher levels of depressive symptoms which characterize samples of homeless individuals (Fischer & Breaky, 1986).

Some positive outcomes can be envisioned if homeless men can attribute homelessness to societal factors. However, negative consequences from attributing homelessness to societal factors are also possible. Recognizing oppression could increase the anger of homeless individuals. While anger might serve as a goad to involvement in social-change movements, anger generally has a negative effect at the individual level. Anger is a major predictor of cardiovascular disease (Siegel, 1992; Smith & Christensen, 1992), a condition for which African-Americans are at increased risk generally (Saab et al., 1997). On a more psychological level, anger has been found to interfere with the emotional processing required to move on after trauma and victimization (Foa, Riggs, Massie, & Yarczower, 1995). Thus, a potential downside to blaming structural factors is an increase in anger.

Additional negative effects of recognizing structural factors in the society as a cause of negative outcomes can be hypothesized. Acknowledging the force of structural factors, which are largely beyond individual control, could exert a negative effect on sense of control and sense of optimism. Many theorists have recognized the double-edged sword of attributing negative outcomes to external factors. Seligman (1998) has explained some of the recent rise in the world wide prevalence of depressive symptoms on the zeitgeist of blaming of structural factors and factors beyond individual control for negative outcomes, a phenomenon which Seligman labels "victimology". Inversely, Janoff-Bulman (1992) has argued that making attributions to one's own behaviors (behavioral self-blame as opposed to characterological self-blame) for outcomes such as cancer in one's children or car accidents can be beneficial. Janoff-Bulman (1992) argues that blaming one's own behavior allows one to retain a sense of control. In fact, data supportive of Janoff-Bulman's view have been adduced (Littrell,

1991, p. 288; Janoff-Bulman, 1992, pp. 128-129). In a recent test of this theory, Delhanty et al. (1997) found that car accident victims who blamed themselves for their accidents experienced less Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, felt less threatened generally, and estimated themselves as less likely to experience another accident, than those who blamed others. Consistent with this line of argument, Ruggiero and Taylor (1997; 1995) found that minimizing perceived discrimination protected the sense of control in both performance and social domains for African-American women. Thus, reasons exist for hypothesizing that blaming one's self for negative outcomes might be associated with stronger levels of control and higher levels of optimism about the future in African-American, homeless men.

Finally, recognizing oppression and discrimination, at least at the theoretical level, probably precludes a strong conviction that the world is a just place. Rubin and Peplau (1975) have found that believing in a just world is associated with stronger religious beliefs. Faith is a strong predictor of being able to cope effectively in times of stress. It is a predictor of coping effectively with HIV in African-American, gay men (Peterson, Folkman, & Bakeman, 1997). Faith relates to recovery time from depression among older persons with health problems (Koenig, George, & Peterson, 1998) and facilitates adjustment in those undergoing kidney transplantation (Tix & Frazier, 1998). Among African-Americans, faith is a predictor of life satisfaction (Ellison, 1990). It could be that faith will assist coping with homelessness as well. It is important to investigate how maintaining perceptions of justice relate to maintaining faith in the homeless.

STUDY ONE

The initial study sought to evaluate how viewing structural factors as causes for homelessness and awareness of discrimination relate to (1) self-esteem, (2) levels of depressive symptoms, (3) anger, and (4) resilience. Thus, Study One included measures of all conceptual variables. Resilience is a construct which encompasses optimism, a sense of mastery (control), and self-esteem. The relatively high correlations among self-esteem, mastery, and optimism have been recognized. In an attempt to reduce the number of variables in a study to protect alpha levels,

researchers (Major, Richards, Cooper, Cozzarelli, & Zubek, 1998) have combined the mastery scale (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978), the self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965), and Life Orientation Test of optimism (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994) to create a measure of resilience. The same strategy was employed in Study One.

A measure developed by Katz and Hass (1988) assessing beliefs about racial discrimination was chosen as the major operationalization of awareness of discrimination for Study One. The beliefs about racial discrimination scale constitutes a face-valid measure of subscription to the belief that discrimination toward African-Americans exists in the United States.

Homeless men were also asked about what they believe causes homelessness. A list of reasons for why people are homeless or poor which had been taken from items used by Feagin (1972) and further supplemented by items from similar work by Feldman (1982), Furnham (1982), and Nilson (1981) was used to assess how homeless men explain homelessness. The list included attributions for homeless to discrimination on the basis of race and class. It included attributions to individual failings as well as structural factors in the society, making it possible to examine the relative blaming of societal causes as opposed to individual causes in contributing to homelessness.

The following findings were anticipated if advocates of empowerment are supported: (1) greater perception of discrimination would be associated with stronger self-esteem, higher resilience, and fewer depressive symptoms; (2) higher attributions to structural causes or lower attributions to individual failings as factors contributing to homelessness would be related to stronger self-esteem, higher resilience, and fewer depressive symptoms. Alternatively, if the predictions of those raising caveats are supported the following pattern was anticipated: (1) greater perceptions of discrimination would be related to greater anger and lower resilience; (2) higher attributions to structural causes or lower attributions to individual failings in contributing to homelessness would be related to more anger and lesser resilience.

METHOD

Research-participants

There were 91 research participants in Study One and 91 in Study Two. For purposes of economy, the samples, and those

procedures which were identical in both studies, are described collectively.

All research-participants were recruited at a soup-kitchen facility. They responded to an extended interview, which included questions in response to a scenario, rating scales, and an extensive interview about work and individual histories. Some of the findings from this investigation are reported elsewhere (Littrell & Beck, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c). Research-participants were approached randomly from the those who were either waiting in line to receive some type of service (e.g., use of the mail room, help in obtaining a Georgia ID needed for employment, or some referral to a social service) or who were congregated outside the front entrance of the facility. Eleven of the approached research-participants refused to participate in the project. The data from twelve research-participants were dropped because their obvious retardation, brain damage, or acute signs of schizophrenia precluded their understanding of the interview materials. Demographic information is reported in Table 1.

Procedure

Research-participants were given the option of reading the materials themselves or having the material read to them. The bulk of the sample opted to read along with the interviewer. Research-participants were paid \$10 to participate. Participation was completely voluntary.

Measures for Study One. Research-participants responded to the previously discussed measures of perception of oppression; to the Mastery Scale (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978); the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale; the CES-Depression Scale (Radloff, 1977); the Life Orientation Test (Scheier et al., 1994) which assesses optimism; a measure assessing trait anger (Siegel, 1985); the Wide Range Achievement Test (Jastek & Wilkinson, 1984), which provides grade levels for spelling, for reading, and for math; and the Similarities Subtest from the Revised Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale, which correlates well (.73) with the overall Intelligence Quotient (Wechsler, 1981). (The intellectual measures were included to examine whether perceptions of oppression were contaminated by intellectual function.) The self-esteem scale, the

Table 1

*Studies 1 & 2**Background Descriptors for the Sample in Study 1 and Study 2*

<i>Trait</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>
African American	100%			
Age		38	6.9	19–59
Slept previous night on the Street	49%			
Slept previous night in Shelter	27%			
Temporarily with Friend or Girl Friend	11%			
Temporarily Residing with a Relative	5%			
Living in Car	.5%			
Paying Rent although Long Term Stability is Dubious	9%			
Spoke with Family in Last Month	79%			
Believes Someone in Family Cares	88%			
Ex-Convict	45%			
Military Hx	25%			
Probation Hx	54%			
Grade		12.4	6.1	3–16
Reading Grade		8	4	
Spelling Grade		7	3.7	
Math Grade		6	2.4	
WAIS-Similarities (scaled score with mean of 10 and SD of 3)		7.3	2.5	

continued

Table 1

Continued

<i>Trait</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>
Lived or Traveled Outside South	45%			
Raised in South	68%			
Either on SSI, SSDI, or claim submitted	22%			
Treated for Mental Illness (not including Substance Abuse)	22.4%			
Self-identified Substance Abuse	58%			
Head Injury Hx	33%			
Robbed	48%			
Beaten-up	42%			
Health Problem (capacity limiting such as cancer, autoimmunity, cardiovascular, limb missing)	27%			
Public Welfare during Childhood	30%			
Father Employed during Childhood	68%			
Father Present during Childhood	60%			
Current Driver's License	31%			
Driver's License Ever	77%			
Bank Account Ever	88%			
Labeled Retarded in School	4%			

Mastery Scale, and the optimism scale were combined to form a resilience scale.

RESULTS

Internal Consistencies for Major Measures

Coefficient alphas for the measures in Study One and Two ranged from .6367 to .8867. Six items from the Katz and Hass measure, selected to maximize internal consistency, were combined to yield a "perception of discrimination on the basis of race" measure, i.e., the extent to which respondents believe discrimination based obstacles exist for African Americans. The six items were: "Black people do not have the same employment opportunities that Whites do"; "It's surprising that Black people do as well as they do, considering all the obstacles they face"; "Too many Blacks still lose out on jobs and promotions because of their skin color"; "Blacks have more to offer than they have been allowed to show"; "The typical urban ghetto public school is not as good as it should be to provide equal opportunities for Blacks"; and "Many Whites show a real lack of understanding of the problems that Blacks face".

Five items ("lack of jobs in some localities", "failure of the society to provide good schools for many Americans", "prejudice and discrimination against minority groups", "bosses are unfair", "lack of jobs which pay a living wage") tapping "structural reasons for homelessness" (negatively weighted) were combined with eight items ("lack of drive and ambition", "lack of thrift and proper money management by poor people", "lack of effort by the poor themselves", "lack of ability and talent", "alcohol and drug problems", "sickness and physical handicaps", "lack of intelligence among poor people", and "no attempts at self improvement") tapping "individual reasons for homelessness" (positively weighted) were combined to examine the relative importance of individual versus structural causes for explaining homelessness.

Relationships with intellectual variables. There was no evidence that the Katz and Hass measure was associated with any of the intellectual measures. However, greater structural attributions for homelessness were predicted by a higher reading level, $r = -.32$,

$N=59$, $p<.05$; and by a higher grade level, $r=-.32$, $N=88$, $p<.01$, but was not related to WAIS Similarities score, to math level, or to spelling level. Thus, attributions for homelessness were associated with educational exposure and reading level. However, since grade level was not associated with any of the psychological correlate variables (depressive symptoms, resilience, anger), grade level was not controlled in the analyses.

How Does Perception of Oppression Relate to Depressive Symptoms?

In order to evaluate how the perceived oppression variables operated as a set in their association with depressive symptoms, the CES-depression measure was regressed upon the perceived discrimination measure (the Katz and Hass items) and composite structural reasons for homeless measure in a forced entry procedure. The Multiple R, .24, reached marginal significance, $F(2,80)=2.52$, $p=.09$. The beta weight for perceived discrimination, $\beta=-.21$, $t(80)=-1.96$, $p=.05$ was significant; while the beta weight for relative attributions to structural factors, $\beta=.15$, $t(80)=1.39$, $p=.17$, was not significant. The zero-order correlation between depressive symptoms and perceived discrimination reached marginal significance levels, $r=-.19$, $N=85$, $p=.08$. These findings were consistent with the hypothesis of empowerment exponents that perceiving discrimination leads to lower depressive symptom levels. (The zero-order correlations among all the major variables in Study One are presented in Table 2).

How Does Perception of Oppression Relate to Anger?

The anger scale was regressed upon the perceived discrimination measure from the Katz and Hass items and composite structural reasons for homeless measure in a forced entry procedure. The Multiple R was not significant. None of the zero-order correlations reached significance.

How Does the Perception of Oppression Relate to Resilience?

Resilience was regressed on the perceived discrimination measure and the relative structural attributions for homelessness measure. The Multiple R, .13, was not significant. Neither of the zero-order correlations was significant. However, examination of the zero-order correlations in the Matrix presented in Table 2

	Mas- tery	Self- Esteem	Opti- mism	Resil- ience	Anger	Depres- sion	Per- ceived Discrim- ination	Struc- tural Reasons for Home- lessness	Just World	Reliance on God	Relative Struc- tural Reasons for Home- lessness
Individual Reasons for Homelessness	.02	-.11	-.29@	-.12	.00	.05	-.07	.32@	—	—	.31@
Composite Measure of Relative Structural Reasons for Homelessness	.04	—	.00	-.24*	-.09	.03	.12	.17	-.80@	—	—

Note: * implies significance at .05 level; @ implies significance at .01 level;
 Low scores on the Mastery Scale signify less mastery.
 Low scores on the Self-Esteem Scale signify more self-esteem.
 Low scores on the Optimism Scale signify more optimism.
 Low scores on the Resilience Scale signify more resilience.
 Low scores on the Anger Scale signify more anger.
 Low scores on the CES-Depression scale signify more depression.
 Low scores on the Perceived Discrimination Scale signify more perceived discrimination.
 Low scores on the Structural Reasons for Homelessness scale signify less importance.
 Low scores on the Just World Scale signify greater belief in a just world.
 Low scores on the Reliance on God scale signify more reliance on God.
 Low scores on the Individual Reasons for Homelessness scale signify less importance.
 Low scores on the Relative Structural Reasons for Homelessness scale signify greater attributions to structural factors.

suggested that greater optimism was predicted by greater belief that homelessness is caused by individual factors, $r = -.29$, $N = 89$, $p = .0065$. Examining the zero-order correlation matrix allowed for nine tests of the Janoff-Bulman hypothesis (3 components of resilience \times 3 operationalizations of attributions). Given nine tests, an alpha level of .00556 is required to maintain an experiment-wise alpha level of .05 (Levine, 1991, p. 69). Consequently, the latter finding of an association between optimism and attributing homelessness to individual factors ($p = .0065$) can only be regarded as suggestive.

How Does Perception of Oppression Relate to Self-Esteem?

Because self-esteem is a more specific construct than resilience, and because of its theoretical importance in its own right, its associations with the oppression measures in this study were evaluated separately. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem measure was regressed upon the perceived discrimination measure and the relative structural attributions for homelessness measure in a forced entry procedure. The Multiple R was not significant, nor were any of the zero-order correlations significant.

DISCUSSION

Study One examined whether awareness of discrimination or attributing disadvantaged status to societal factors would provide protection from depressive symptoms and bolster self-esteem. There was no support for a protective effect on self-esteem. However, the association between greater awareness of discrimination and lower levels of depressive symptoms, which reached the marginal level of significance, was consistent with the idea that such awareness can buffer the effects of negative outcomes (such as homelessness).

With regard to the possibility of adverse effects accruing from awareness of discrimination and attributing negative status to societal factors, there was no evidence that awareness of discrimination or blaming societal factors for homelessness contributes to greater levels of anger. However, the marginally significant association between blaming homelessness on individual failings and greater optimism (a component of resilience) was consistent

with the hypothesis of Janoff-Bulman (1992) that blaming negative outcomes on individual failings can have protective effects.

STUDY TWO

In order to more fully explore the issue of the impact of perceiving oppression, Study two examined how the conceptual converse of perceiving oppression, viz., belief in a just world, would relate to depressive symptoms and resilience.

An association between belief in a just world and faith in God has been reported in the general population (Rubin & Peplau, 1975). It is important to determine whether this same association will be found in a disadvantaged population in which the veridicality of the assumption of a just world might be often challenged by daily occurrences.

Faith in God is a major coping mechanism for many people. Homeless men are under considerable stress and must cope with their stressful circumstances. We hypothesized that those homeless men who relied more on God would exhibit more resilience. We hypothesized that if there is an association between belief in a just world and resilience, it would be mediated through reliance on God. That is, belief in a just world bolsters reliance on God, which is then associated with resilience.

In summary, the following hypotheses were tested in Study Two: (1) belief in a just world is associated with a lower level of depressive symptoms, with stronger resilience, and stronger reliance on God; and (2) the relationship between belief in a just world and resilience is mediated through reliance on God. A mediation hypothesis requires an association between the mediated variable (belief in a just world) and the dependent variable (resilience); an association between the mediated variable (belief in a just world) and the mediator (reliance on God); and an association between the mediating variable (reliance on God) and the dependent variable (resilience). If the association between the mediated variable (belief in a just world) and the dependent variable (resilience) is no longer significant after controlling for the mediating variable (reliance on God), then the case for mediation is supported. (See Baron and Kenny, 1986, for a discussion of how to test for mediating variables.)

METHOD

Research-Participants and Procedure

Ninety-one research-participants were assessed in Study Two. The procedure for Study Two was identical to Study One.

Measures. Research-participants were assessed on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, the Life Orientation Test of optimism, the Mastery Scale, the CES-Depression Scale, the COPE (Carver, Scheier, Weintraub, 1989) religious coping scale, and the Just World Scale (Rubin & Peplau, 1975).

RESULTS

How does belief in a just world relate to levels of depressive symptoms and resilience?

Belief in a just world was not related to the CES-depression scale ($r=.03$, $N=86$, ns). It was associated with resilience, ($r=.26$, $N=86$, $p<.02$), such that greater resilience predicted stronger belief in a just world. With respect to the individual components of resilience, just world was not related to self-esteem ($r=.03$, $N=88$, ns). It was associated with mastery ($r=-.23$, $N=87$, $p<.05$), such that greater mastery predicted stronger belief in a just world; and optimism ($r=.33$, $N=85$, $p<.001$), with more optimism predicting greater belief in a just world.

If one assumes that the associations of belief in a just world with resilience, self-esteem, mastery, and optimism are all tests of the same basic question, then some protection of alpha levels is required. If there are four tests of the same question within an experiment, a significance level of .0125 is required to maintain an experiment-wise significance level of .05 (Levine, 1991, p. 70). Employing this standard, the probability levels of the associations of resilience and belief in a just world and mastery and belief in a just world did not reach statistical significance. The association of optimism and belief in a just world was clearly significant.

How Does Belief in a Just World Relate to Reliance on God?

In this sample, 77.5% achieved a value of "one" on the scale, which ranged from one (high) to eleven (low), measuring reliance on God in times of stress, suggesting that faith is very important to homeless, African-American men. Consistent with Rubin and

Peplau's (1975) finding that religious people more often believe in a Just World, the Just World Scale was associated with the reliance on God measure ($r=.23$, $N=85$, $p<.03$).

Examining the Variables through Multiple Regression

Both belief in a just world and reliance on God were (at least marginally) significantly associated with resilience and were correlated with each other. To determine how reliance on God and belief in a just world conjointly related to resilience, resilience was regressed upon the independent variables of reliance on God and belief in a just world. The Multiple R, .2879, was significant, $F(2,80)=3.61$, $p=.03$. Only the reliance on God achieved a near significant beta weight, $\beta=.2035$, $t(1,80)=1.84$, $p=.07$. The beta weight for belief in a just world, .1593, was not significant, $t(1,80)=1.44$, $p=.15$. This analysis suggested that the effect of belief in a just world on resilience may be mediated through reliance on God. That is, belief in a just world is related to greater personality resilience through its association with reliance on God.

DISCUSSION

Belief in a just world was not related to depressive symptoms. It was marginally associated with personality resilience and clearly associated with reliance on God. It appears that the specific aspect of personality resilience, viz., optimism, accounted for the relationship between belief in a just world and resilience. Maintaining a client's personality resilience represents an important objective for many practitioners. In trying to achieve that objective it is probably helpful to recognize that the effect of belief in a just world on personality resilience is mediated through religious coping. Thus, belief in a just world bolsters reliance on God which, in turn, relates to resilience.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The studies presented here examined the associations between psychological variables and recognition of oppression in the society. Awareness of oppression was operationalized in a variety of ways (perception of racial discrimination, blaming homelessness on societal as opposed to individual factors, and

lesser belief in a just world). To some extent, both the views of those advocating for encouraging clients to recognize oppression as well as those offering caveats were supported. Consistent with Gutierrez (1990) hypothesis that recognizing discrimination can offer protection from depression and lowered self-esteem during hard times, those homeless men who perceived greater discrimination displayed lower levels of depressive symptoms, although they were not distinguished by higher self-esteem. Thus, the findings (which due to marginal levels of significance were only suggestive) were partially supportive of Gutierrez. However, the data also were consistent with the caveats of those who argue against blaming negative outcomes on societal factors which are often beyond the control of the individual. An association (which only reached marginal levels of significance) between blaming homelessness on individual factors and optimism was found. There was clear support for the hypothesis that maintaining belief in a just world is associated with stronger reliance on God and greater optimism.

Further thoughts on the findings for self-esteem. In our investigation, self-esteem was not associated with the perception of discrimination against African-Americans. Our findings failed to replicate a previously reported study. Crocker et al. (1991) found, with a sample smaller than ours, that African-American women who could attribute negative outcomes to discrimination exhibited less reduction in their self-esteem. An explanation is needed for the discrepancies in our findings.

Indigent African-American people identify less with other African-American people than do middle class African-Americans (Stokes, Murray, Peacock, & Kaiser, 1994). Rowley, Sellers, Charous, and Smith (1998) report that collective identification is required for obtaining enhancement of personal self-esteem as a result of a positive view of one's group. It is not a large leap, from the combined findings of Stokes et al. (1994) and Rowley et al. (1998) to expect that strong identification with a victimized group may also be necessary for this awareness of discrimination to offer protection to one's own self-esteem given negative experiences. That is, if one does not strongly identify with a reference group, perceiving discrimination against the

reference group might not imply much with regard to one's self. Thus, a lack of identification with the African-American community may explain why our African-American, homeless men failed to replicate Crocker et al. (1991) results obtained with middle-class, African-American women.

Self-esteem is multifaceted. There are multiple domains of self-esteem, which include social facility and performance skills. Ruggiero and Taylor (1997) found that African-American women who did not blame a negative evaluation of their performance on an evaluator's discrimination achieved benefits in terms of social self-esteem, while suffering in terms of performance self-esteem. In the Ruggiero and Taylor study, those women who did not acknowledge the experimentally induced evidence of discrimination, exhibited higher opinions of their ability to get along with others. A large percentage of the homeless men whom we interviewed were friendly and non-abrasive. It would be interesting to assess their self-perceptions of interpersonal skills. It would be further interesting to determine how this social skills dimension of self-esteem relates to perceptions of discrimination in our sample.

Thoughts about Actual Rather than Perceived Oppression

In this study, because demographic variables were also assessed, it was possible to identify variables that predicted outcomes (self-esteem, depressive symptoms, optimism, mastery). Ironically, the data were consistent with the view that *actual* social injustice does undermine the self-esteem and sense of mastery of African-American, homeless men. Specifically, a prison record was associated with diminished mastery and diminished self-esteem and with greater anger (Littrell & Beck, 1998b). Although one cannot infer causation from correlational data, it is plausible that prison undermines mastery and self-esteem as well as exacerbating anger. In the course of this study, we did ask those who had prison records about the charges which resulted in their incarcerations. With five exceptions, for the bulk of the sample, the offenses were drug related, non-violent offenses (Littrell & Beck, 1998b). Many scholars have recognized that the current criminal justice system and the drug laws in particular have had a profound, differential impact on poor African-Americans. The fairness of

the more stringent sentencing for crack cocaine offenses (more prevalent in impoverished areas) as opposed to powder cocaine offenses (more often prevalent among middle class persons) has been raised (Grassley, 1998; Hadjor, 1995, pp. 112–117; Marable, 1997, pp. 44–45). Thus, a lack of actual social justice probably does undermine self-esteem and mastery in poor African-American men. Practitioners who are concerned with social justice, should be arguing for diversion programs for those committing drug-related offenses shifting out of the criminal justice system and into treatment programs. Although the studies reported here suggest that there are negative ramifications to the recognition of social injustice by African-American, homeless men themselves, the cause of social justice should be advanced.

Acknowledgement of oppression and empowerment. Although our studies suggest caveats for the manner in which practitioners promote empowerment, the findings of our study do not speak against encouraging homeless persons to become politically active. Our findings pertain to the wisdom of denying individual causes of negative outcomes. Although an association between perception of oppression and political activism has been documented in some disenfranchised groups (Guimond & Dube-Simard, 1983), it may be possible to engage in the political process without focused attention on the concept of oppression. Future research might examine whether one can be effectively engaged in the political arena without making oppression the issue, or at least not acknowledging the impact of oppression on outcomes.

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